How to Unschool Your Child

Three Parts: Deschooling Your Child Creating Opportunities for Learning Preparing for College and Other Goals

Unschooling is considered the most fluid style of homeschooling. There is no predetermined curriculum and there are no set boundaries except those you and your child create together. Many parents feel a bit apprehensive about allowing their children such freedom. They can feel nervous that their children won’t actually learn anything, or that they won’t want to spend their time productively. However, advocates of unschooling believe that children will invariably begin learning at their own pace when they’re allowed to pursue their own interests.

Part 1 Deschooling Your Child

1 **Eliminate the expectation of “learning.**” If children have already had some experience of formal schooling, they likely have certain associations with the idea of learning. For most children, this means they think of learning as necessarily unpleasant or something mandated by an external authority. Let them know that from now on, there will be no expectation of them learning any specific subject, or studying for any exams.[1]

- Even if you’re afraid of your child wasting time or goofing off, avoid pressuring them to do any specific activity. Let them spend their time however they want, even if it means playing video games or watching TV for long stretches.
- Depending on a child’s experience of school so far, they may need more or less time to fully “deschool.” It may take anywhere from a couple of weeks to six months for a child to fully adjust to being able to determine their own schedule. Be patient.

2 **Provide a rich environment in place of school.** Instead of pressuring or requiring your child to do certain things, simply provide the opportunities for them to engage with exciting ideas or people.[2]

- Invite interesting friends of yours over for lunch or dinner. With your child around, ask them about what they’ve been up to lately, or what they think of current events.
- Do interesting projects yourself that your child might be curious about. You can bake bread from scratch, take up a musical instrument, do a craft project, or do some home repairs.
- Make sure there are engaging toys and activities available at home. Purchase the books and toys that you loved as a kid, or that you always wanted. Don’t force them on your child, but make sure they’re available.
- Go out and about and invite your child. Invite your child along on errands like going grocery shopping or to the library.

3 **Trust your child’s interests.** One of the key premises of unschooling is that children will naturally develop interests that will lead to learning. Take note of what interests your child and let them pursue those things.[3]

- Even things that may not seem “educational” may lead to learning. For example, playing video games may lead a child to learn to read, so they can follow the directions. Baking cookies may lead to learning about fractions or chemistry.
- When a child shows interest in something, encourage them to pursue it fully. If they get stuck or have questions, help them learn. For example, if a child is trying to bake cookies, but asks, “What is ¼ cup?” use this as a learning moment. If a child asks you to help them read instructions for a game, take the time to help them learn to read the instructions themselves.
- Follow your child’s interests in a deep way. For example, if your child shows interest in baking, you may want to take them to a local farm to actually see where milk and eggs come from.

4 **Obtain the right to legally homeschool your child.** The legality of homeschooling your child will vary depending on where you live. In most states, it’s relatively easy to register your child as homeschooled. However, make sure

to look up the laws where you live so that you can continue to homeschool your child safely.[4]

- In some places, all you need to do is register with the school superintendent 30 days before the start of the school year.
- Generally, there is no requirement that you as a parent have any certificate or qualifications to homeschool your own child.
- If you feel daunted by the process, seek out a local homeschooling group or advocacy website for assistance navigating any bureaucracy.

Part 2 Creating Opportunities for Learning

1 **Make a tentative schedule.** While the freedom of unschooling is one of its great joys, it can lead some children and parents to feel bored or listless if they have no structure. You can create a personalized schedule to help you plan your days and weeks.[5]

- The schedule should include concrete activities, as opposed to learning goals. For example, you could write, “Monday: Go to the library, visit local farm animal sanctuary, make homemade pizza for dinner.” Avoid writing things like, “Monday: Practice reading, learn about mammal biology, practice fractions.”
- The schedule can include goals, however. For example, if your child wants to build a treehouse or start a lemonade stand, you can put things on the calendar such as:
    - Week 1: Research types of treehouses.
    - Week 2: Draw plans for treehouse.
    - Week 3: Visit Aunt Vicky’s woodshop to ask for advice.
    - Week 4: Begin building treehouse according to plans.

2 **Create situations for others to help your child learn.** No one expects an unschooler’s parents to know everything. Nor is it healthy for children to only have one or two adults they can learn from. Make sure there are other people for your child to interact with and learn from.[6]

- Sign your child up for a class or group activity. It can be anything from a sports team to a drama class.
- Many homeschoolers and unschoolers form groups so that kids have others to socialize with. Join a group in your area.
- Take your child to museums, zoos, or regional parks and attend a tour or other guided activity there.

3 **Participate in local events.** Since your child isn’t in school all day, they’ll have plenty of time to get involved with things going on in your town. Look for events that your child can get involved with, whether with you or on their own.[7]

- Check the local newspaper to find out what is going on. There may be an article about a community cleanup effort, or a classified ad looking for people to foster puppies for the animal shelter. There are plenty of things to do if you just look!
- Volunteer at a local charitable organization with your child. For example, helping at the local soup kitchen can help your child learn good values as well as learning about the science of cooking.

4 **Be honest with your child.** You may feel a lot of extra pressure now that you’ve taken on full responsibility for your child’s education. It’s natural to worry that your child isn’t learning “correctly,” or that you don’t know enough to be a good teacher. When your own limitations come up, be honest with your child about them.[8]

- If your child asks you a question and you don’t know the answer, say something like, “That’s a really good question. Let’s look that up together, since I’m not actually sure of the answer.”
- If you are feeling burnt out or like you need a break, you can say, “I think I need some time for myself right now. Why don’t you go work on something on your own for a while, while I take a rest”

5 **Allow the child to learn at their own pace.** Hopefully you started practicing this during the deschooling phase. However, it’s important to continue letting your child learn at their own pace, even if it makes you uneasy at times.

Remember that contrary to what is taught in school, there's actually no correct pace at which children should be expected to learn something.[9]

- If a child expresses that they want help learning something quickly, such as reading or arithmetic, take that as an opportunity to actively help them. But make sure it's guided by their own interest in the subject.

6 **Emphasize your support.** When unschooling your child, it's great to continually express support and enthusiasm about what your child is doing and learning. This will encourage your child to keep actively pursuing their own interests, which will inevitably lead to learning.[10]

- Avoid being too critical. If your child is spending a lot of time with activities you don't prefer, try to hold your tongue. If you're genuinely curious about why they're so interested in an activity, you can say, "Tell me what you enjoy about that TV show so much." That might help you understand where your child is coming from.
- You can show support by saying things like, "Wow. You spent so much time working on that today. That's amazing dedication!" or, "It seems like you're struggling with that, but that's okay. Some things take a lot of practice to get better at. You're doing great."

7 **Connect with other unschoolers.** Other people who've been unschooling for a while can be a great resource. They likely have been through the same struggles and difficulties as you and your child. Find a group in your area or online and ask for support or seek answers to your questions.[11]

- Other unschoolers may have great ideas for activities to do or groups to join.
- Other parents may be able to reassure you if it seems that your child isn't learning anything or doesn't have any productive interests.

Part 3 Preparing for College and Other Goals

1 **Consider internships or apprenticeships.** If your child has a specific area of interest, try to help them find a way to apprentice or intern in that area. Many professionals will be happy to have a helpful and curious young person around.[12]

- Don't assume your child will be paid for their time and work. Often, internships and apprenticeships are unpaid. If you expect your child to be paid, establish this before they begin working.
- Internships and apprenticeships can be great stepping stones toward a specific career, or can look good in a college application portfolio.
- Make sure your child will be learning skills directly related to their interests. For example, if they've decided to apprentice with a fashion designer because they're interested in clothing design, make sure they won't simply be stuck in the wholesale shipping department packing boxes.

2 **Begin researching college options early.** Because you're doing unschooling, there's no set graduation day, and there's no guidance counselor reminding your child of college application deadlines. If your child is interested in going to college, start looking at options a year or two before they plan to apply.[13]

- There are many colleges that offer programs without majors or academic requirements. These might be well suited to your child if they want a college experience similar to unschooling.
- Trade schools can be good options for unschoolers who have already found a passion they'd like to pursue as a career.
- Contact college admission offices and ask about what kinds of transcripts or documentation they require from homeschooled applicants. If you do this early, it will give you plenty of time to make sure you have what you need before applying.

3 **Register your child for single college courses.** Once your child is old enough and mature enough, try registering them for a class at your local community college or trade school. Even four year colleges will often let a non-matriculated student take a course or two.[14]

- Taking a college class shows colleges that your child is able to adjust to a school setting and handle college level academics.

- Even if your child doesn't plan to go to college full-time, taking classes at a community college or trade school can be great ways to supplement their learning once they're in their teens.

4 **Enroll them in SAT/ACT prep courses.** Most colleges and universities require applicants to take a standardized test, such as the SAT. It's possible that your child may do very well on the test without any kind of preparation. However, if you're concerned that they might not do well on the test, you can enroll them in a preparatory course.[15]

- If there aren't any courses available in your area, you can sign them up for an online course, or hire a private tutor.
- Not all universities require applicants to take a standardized test. Contact the specific institutions you're interested in to find out what their requirements are.

5 **Create a transcript and diploma for your child.** Even though your child won't receive a formal diploma from a school, they will need something to demonstrate that they completed the equivalent of a high school education. Together, create a portfolio that demonstrates the work they've done over the past few years. Meanwhile, as the parent, you'll need to translate that work into a type of transcript.[16]

- Your child's portfolio should demonstrate the breadth of what they've done as an unschooler. It can contain photos of them participating in activities, writing and artwork they've done, and documentation (such as video or web documentation) of other projects they've completed.
- When writing the transcript, make sure it reflects the way your child's studies fit into a traditional course of study. For example, the work a child has spent volunteering at a local farm become "biology" and "ecology." The local 10K they ran qualifies as "physical education."
- You do need to make your child some kind of diploma. However, you can determine what form this takes and whether or not you want to hold some kind of formal ceremony for its presentation.

Tips

- If there is really a severe lack of interest in a particular subject that you feel should be examined at least in part, try to ascertain what it is about that subject that your child really dislikes. Encourage conversation and discussion. Often much is gleaned from having a "general" discussion with your child.
- College isn't for everybody. When you begin unschooling your child, don't assume that your child will end up wanting to enroll in a university at age 18. Allow their learning to take them in whatever direction is natural for them.
- Children usually respond well when information is presented via games. Keep games around the house and invent your own. They may create learning opportunities that you didn't even anticipate.
- Reach out to your community for help. Being your child's parent and their teacher can become exhausting at times. Rely on other family members, community members, and friends to help relieve some of the pressure when you need it.

Warnings

- Children should not be forced to sit in front of a computer, or with a book on a subject that there is clearly no interest for. This is counterproductive and the child may become resistant.

Sources and Citations

1. http://zenhabits.net/unschool/
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